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# Illiberal and irrational? Trump and the challenge of liberal modernity in US foreign policy

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## Abstract

Building on a growing body of literature on the application of Morgenthau's ethics to post-Cold War US foreign policy, this article applies Morgenthau's concept of irrationality to Trump's foreign policy. Based on this application, the article highlights the limit of rationality in Morgenthau's theoretical analysis. Specifically, the article argues, pace neo-realist critiques of 'liberal hegemony', that Trump reveals an empirical puzzle: US foreign policy can be *both* irrational *and* illiberal simultaneously in the pursuit of nationalistic universalism. This is the case, the article argues, because nationalistic universalism in Morgenthau's analysis is not rooted in liberalism per se but the dynamics of liberal modernity. The Trump puzzle thus reveals an on-going tension between rationality and liberal modernity in Morgenthau's theoretical analysis: rationality offers an insufficient tool to take upon the challenge of liberal modernity from which Trump's nationalistic universalism stems. This, the article concludes, leaves Morgenthau's concept of interest 'defined in terms of power' open to misappropriation to ends contrary to their original aim: furthering nationalistic universalism, rather than limiting power.

## Keywords

irrationality, Morgenthau, Trump, US foreign policy

## Introduction

This article builds on a growing body of literature on the application of Morgenthau's ethics to US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.<sup>1</sup> It does so by drawing on Morgenthau's concept of irrationality in US foreign policy. While Morgenthau's concept of irrationality has been implicitly and explicitly applied to post-Cold War US foreign policy prior to Trump, this article's aim is twofold: firstly, to extend the empirical application beyond existing contributions to the Trump administration, and

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secondly, based on this empirical contribution, to highlight the limit of rationality in Morgenthau's theoretical analysis. Irrationality, unlike liberal idealism, means more than simply attempting to impose a mistaken liberal ideology.<sup>2</sup> It implies, more generally, the reinterpretation of reality to inflate threats, and confuse vital and desirable interests in a manner that ultimately renders excessive violence, or what Felix Roesch referred to as 'empirical power',<sup>3</sup> the end of a policy that serves the policymakers' egos and offers them the illusion of mastery of reality. Irrationality is driven by a nationalistic universalist drive that Morgenthau's concept of rationality in *Politics Among Nations* sought to counter. This drive depoliticises the nation's interests and values, that is, elevates them above political deliberation and adjustment, thus eschewing diplomacy and raising the possibility of conflict.

The distinction between irrationality and liberal idealism explains a shortcoming in current neo-realist critiques of US foreign policy. Neo-realist scholars, such as Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, argue that the flaw in post-Cold War US foreign policy is largely due to the policymakers' *Hell of Good Intentions* or *Great Delusion* following a strategy of 'liberal hegemony'. These critiques cannot explain why a president such as Trump follows the same pattern of his predecessors despite his attack on liberalism. Trump's attack on liberalism can be seen for example in his zero-sum logic on trade and protectionism, his skepticism towards promoting liberal values such as human rights and democracy in US foreign policy, and his flattering of authoritarian leaders. Trump's 'illiberal hegemony' presents a puzzle to neo-realist critiques of US foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> It shows that the flaw in US foreign policy is not its 'liberal idealism', that is, the idealistic pursuit of a 'concept of the liberal international order' or 'liberal hegemony'.<sup>5</sup> This puzzle becomes clear when neo-realists, on one hand, concede that Trump challenges liberal ideology in US foreign policy, meanwhile they argue that Trump represents a continuation of his predecessors' policies. For example, despite accepting Trump's strategy of 'illiberal hegemony', Walt argues in his recent piece in *International Relations*, that Trump's 'foreign policy is essentially a chaotic, confusing, and inept version of his predecessors' approach'.<sup>6</sup> Despite conceding that Trump challenges key liberal institutions and does not have the intention to pursue even 'a "liberal-lite" world order', Mearsheimer argues that Trump shows 'considerable continuity with his predecessors' policies'.<sup>7</sup> Patrick Porter argues that Trump represents a 'revolt' against the liberal order, but also a continuation in US foreign policy towards 'permanent war'.<sup>8</sup> What explains this continuity?

The continuity lies in the persistence of irrationality, rather than liberal hegemony, in US foreign policy. Trump's foreign policy towards Iran illustrates this continuity. Although Trump's stance vis-à-vis Iran, scrapping the nuclear deal, deviates from his predecessor, it is in line with the policy of regime change that long defined the US position towards Iran. Trump's scrapping of the nuclear deal thus, on one hand, represents the continuation of this policy of the status quo that relies on the US-Sunni-Israeli alliance. But despite representing such continuity, Trump's Iran policy is not driven by a liberal ideology. Rather, it is a case of irrationality in US foreign policy, namely a case where US foreign policy reinterprets and inflates the reality of the Iranian threat, through combining Iran's nuclear ambitions with its support for terrorism and ability to dominate the region in a manner that ultimately threatens the US homeland. In the process, US foreign

policy confuses a desirable interest, halting Iran's 'bad behaviour' in the region, which can be contained with regional alliances, with the vital interest of preventing Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon. Once the line between these interests is blurred, US foreign policy becomes inflexible, with military force the only strategy to defend both interests in tandem.<sup>9</sup> The result is the primacy of empirical power in a policy driven by a nationalistic universalist drive that, on the one hand, depoliticises US interests and eschews diplomacy, and, on the other, serves the policymakers' egos and gives them the illusion of mastery of the reality in the Iranian context.

The article thus argues, pace existing neo-realist critiques of 'liberal hegemony' in post-Cold War US foreign policy, that Trump reveals a puzzle: US foreign policy can be *both* irrational *and* illiberal simultaneously. This is the case, the article argues, because the flaw in US foreign policy under Trump is not rooted in liberalism per se, but the dynamics of liberal modernity: the atomisation of society, excessive individualism, lack of tradition, and economic and social inequalities. These dynamics, on the one hand, render the individual powerless and insecure in liberal modernity, while, on the other hand, lead to the individual's identification with the nation's excess and irrationality to fill the gap in their own power and security. The Trump puzzle in turn reveals an on-going tension between rationality and liberal modernity in Morgenthau's theoretical analysis: rationality offers an insufficient tool to take upon the challenge of liberal modernity from which Trump's nationalistic universalism stems. This, the article concludes, leaves Morgenthau's concept of interest 'defined in terms of power' open to misappropriation to ends contrary to their original aim: furthering nationalistic universalism, rather than limiting power.

To proceed with this argument, the article is structured as follows. Section one presents an overview of the concept of irrationality in Morgenthau. Section two reviews some of the applications of the concept to post-Cold War US foreign policy prior to Trump and develops the case for irrationality in US foreign policy under Trump. It thus presents the Trump puzzle: that US foreign policy can be both illiberal and irrational. Section three draws on this puzzle to highlight the on-going tension between rationality and liberal modernity in Morgenthau's theoretical analysis.

## **Irrationality: a conceptual overview**

With notable exceptions,<sup>10</sup> Morgenthau's notion of irrationality received little explicit attention in the classical realist literature. This is, despite that in the fifth edition of *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau referred to a coherent system of irrationality becoming increasingly prevalent in US foreign policy. This system encompasses five factors:

'the imposition upon the empirical world of a simplistic and *a priori* picture of the world derived from folklore and ideological assumption, that is the replacement of experience with superstition; the refusal to correct this picture of the world in the light of experience; the persistence in a foreign policy derived from the misperception of reality and the use of intelligence for the purpose not of adapting policy to reality but of reinterpreting reality to fit policy; the egotism of the policy makers widening the gap between perception and policy, on the one hand, and reality, on the other; finally the urge to close the gap at least subjectively by action, any kind of action, that creates the illusion of mastery over a recalcitrant reality'.<sup>11</sup>

An irrational foreign policy is thus not based on the calibration of US interests and strategy in an analysis of the empirical context. Rather, it redefines this context in terms of an ideological assumption and refuses to correct this assumption in light of experience. This redefinition of the context, as Morgenthau elaborates in his analysis of Vietnam,<sup>12</sup> involves an inflation of threats that, on one hand, confuses vital for desirable interests and, on the other hand, renders military force seem as the sole strategy to pursue these interests. In Vietnam, the ideological background of 'containment' came to reinterpret the reality on the ground. Thus US policy makers sought 'to put the principle of the Truman Doctrine into practice by identifying revolution with Communism and trying to stop Communism everywhere'.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, they failed to distinguish cases where Communism threatened US vital interests, such as Cuba, from Vietnam, an 'independent national Communism after the model of Yugoslavia' where containing communism was only desirable from the standpoint of US interests.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this confusion of US vital and desirable interests, not only the threat Vietnam posed to the US was heightened, but military force also seemed like the only viable strategy: an action that served the policymakers' egos, creating 'the illusion of mastery over a recalcitrant reality' while dragging the US into an unnecessary war.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of irrationality, like rationality, was grounded in Morgenthau's well-known assumption about human nature as bound to the tragic condition of 'do[ing] evil while we try to do good' and necessarily 'abandon[ing] one moral end in favour of another', which he theorised in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*.<sup>16</sup> Robert Schuett traced this assumption to its Freudian root that differentiated the individual's desire from power (*animus dominandi*) from the mere desire to survive. The desire for power, as Schuett argues, 'does not derive from immediate survival concerns; man *lusts* for power in the sense of Freud's pleasure principle'.<sup>17</sup> Here the instinct is for 'self-assertion',<sup>18</sup> or 'prove oneself' as Roesch puts it,<sup>19</sup> that is different from the instinct for 'self-preservation'. While the latter has limits, the former, associated with power, has no ceiling. When Morgenthau defined interest 'in terms of power' in *Politics Among Nations*, it was this Freudian, unlimited, irrational, concept of power that he sought to counter, lest the individual's irrational and unlimited desires, suppressed in domestic politics through the law and morality, was projected 'on the international sphere [where] there are no societal restrictions'.<sup>20</sup> It is here that Roesch's interpretation of Morgenthau's concept of power as being a normative concept becomes relevant. For, to Morgenthau, 'interest defined as power' prescribes the limit of what power can achieve in a normative sense. Thus, to Morgenthau, as Roesch argues, power is primarily a normative concept that seeks to 'establish the political, as it enables people to pursue their interests and work together for a common good'.<sup>21</sup> This normative concept of power is grounded in what Hartmut Behr refers to as the 'ethics of anti-hubris'. This is an ethic that is 'aware of the limits of know-ability of the political'.<sup>22</sup> It refuses to depoliticise the political through standardising and fixing the national interest in universal moral values or Schmittian friend/enemy distinctions. Instead, it seeks to contextualise those interests as spatio-historical, concrete, and open to negotiation/adjustment with other interests. The national interest defined as power is thus, as Behr puts it, a 'critical device for reflecting upon foreign policy',<sup>23</sup> a device that refuses to superimpose universal values as part of a hubristic and nationalistic moral or political



crusade. In ethico-political terms, it follows the dictates of the ‘lesser evil’, which as Sean Molloy argues, ‘gives rise to the development of specifically political virtues such as prudence and moderation which raise the possibility of moral politics beyond mere expedience’.<sup>24</sup> In Vietnam, US foreign policy failed to follow the dictate of the lesser evil by using excessive violence, or ‘empirical power’ as Roesch puts it,<sup>25</sup> where no essential US interests were at stake.<sup>26</sup>

But this does not mean that US foreign policy was merely ‘idealistic’ in Vietnam. Idealism implies an attempt to impose abstract moral ideals or an ideology such as ‘liberal hegemony’ while disregarding the concrete facts on the ground. Irrationality, while it may involve the erroneous imposition of ideology, also implies the reinterpretation of reality to inflate threats, and confuse vital and desirable interests in a manner that ultimately renders excessive violence or ‘empirical power’ the end of a policy that serves the policymakers’s egos and offers them the illusion of mastery of reality. It is crucial to make this separation because irrationality means the pursuit of empirical power as an end in itself may or may not be guided by a strategy of liberal hegemony. When neo-realist critics of US foreign policy present a critique of liberal idealism, they can explain the excessive use of violence in US foreign policy due to a flawed strategy of liberal hegemony. But they cannot explain how illiberal hegemony under Trump may also present a continuation of such policy of ‘permanent war’. The concept of irrationality here becomes relevant. Irrationality, while it may be associated with the imposition of an ideology, such as liberal hegemony, in fact is more directly associated with what Morgenthau initially set out to critique in *Politics Among Nations*: nationalistic universalism. In depoliticising the nation’s values and interests, nationalistic universalism is incapable of respecting the interests of other nations, particularly on issues of desirable US interest. It leads to the abandonment of normative power and its substitution for empirical power.<sup>27</sup> In the context of Vietnam, Morgenthau argued, this had damaging consequences for US interests and moral image. Thus, ‘Vietnam’ as Lebow argues, ‘was [to Morgenthau] costing the United States its *hegemonia*’.<sup>28</sup>

Having briefly outlined the concept of irrationality in Morgenthau’s analysis, the next section turns to some of its implicit and explicit applications in the post-Cold War IR literature prior to and under Trump.

## **Irrationality in post-Cold War US foreign policy prior to and under Trump**

Morgenthau’s analysis of irrationality both implicitly and explicitly influenced a body of work on US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. The implicit influence is found in studies that invoked the moral basis of Morgenthau’s analysis of power and rationality in political action to critique US War on Terror,<sup>29</sup> neo-conservatism in post-Cold War US foreign policy,<sup>30</sup> and the Iraq War in 2003.<sup>31</sup> The revival of these examples, particularly in the context of the War on Terror and the Iraq War, differentiated between the less morally restrained groups such as the neo-conservatives and presidents such as Bush, and the more restrained and realist presidents, such as Obama.<sup>32</sup> This distinction was critiqued by others, who made more explicit applications of Morgenthau’s concept of irrationality and depicted a pattern of irrationality in (humanitarian) military interventionism in US

foreign policy during the post-Cold War era, irrelevant to the US administration in place.<sup>33</sup> A ‘coherent system of irrationality’ was thus observed by the latter, which ran along the Clinton administration’s action in Kosovo (1999), Bush’s invasion of Iraq (2003) and Obama’s intervention in Libya (2011). In all these cases, ‘post-Cold War US foreign policy decisions were irrational in that they reinterpreted reality to fit a simplistic picture accepted by US policymakers a priori, and sought the use of military force as the sole strategy to impose the inviolability of the ideals entailed in this picture’.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile a number of techniques were used to heighten the security threat, such as Clinton’s use of false historical analogies in the Balkans,<sup>35</sup> and the likening of Middle Eastern dictators to the ideal type – Hitler.

With this critique, it is easy to assume, as neo-realist scholars such as Walt and Mearsheimer do, that US foreign policy failure was due to the indoctrination with a false ideology – liberal hegemony. Trump’s *illiberal* hegemony however challenges such an assumption. Indeed, the Trump puzzle today is this: that he is neither liberal nor rational. The first part of this claim – that Trump is not liberal – is widely covered in the literature.<sup>36</sup> How, then, is Trump’s foreign policy ‘irrational’? The next sub-section proceeds to unpack and defend this claim on the continuity of irrationality in US foreign policy under Trump, despite his ‘illiberal’ approach to US hegemony.

### *Continuity of irrationality under Trump*

US foreign policy towards Iran today presents an ideal case to illustrate the continuity of irrationality under Trump. The rationale behind the choice of this case lies in the parallel it shares with Vietnam and Iraq, both textbook cases of irrationality. Like Vietnam and Iraq, Trump’s foreign policy towards Iran involves an inflation of threat that, on the one hand, confuses US vital and desirable interests, and, on the other hand, renders military force the sole strategy to pursue these interests. The result is the primacy of empirical power in a policy driven by a nationalistic universalist drive that, on the one hand, depoliticises US interests and eschews diplomacy, and, on the other, serves the policymakers’ egos and gives them the illusion of mastery of the reality in the Iranian context.

The comparison between Iraq and Iran was first depicted by Obama in his remarks on the nuclear deal. What is crucial in Obama’s comparison is the link he draws between the prioritisation of war in Iraq and the standing against a diplomatic approach to Iran. ‘Many of the same people’ Obama argued, ‘who argued for the war in Iraq are now making the case against the Iran nuclear deal’.<sup>37</sup> The prioritisation of the military strategy, making it seem like the only viable strategy, is a key characteristic of irrationality in foreign policy. As Morgenthau discovered in Vietnam,<sup>38</sup> and others in Iraq,<sup>39</sup> it legitimises itself through the reinterpretation of reality to inflate the threat, and confuse vital and desirable interests. Like in Vietnam and Iraq, such inflation of threat is currently present in the case of Iran. Already in 2017, the US *National Security Strategy* (NSS) portrayed Iran as a ‘rogue state’ and lumped it together with key revisionist powers, Russia and China, as well as terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, as a key threat to US national security.<sup>40</sup> ‘The Iranian regime’ the document argued, ‘sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our

partners'.<sup>41</sup> In a key speech on the Iranian nuclear deal, and drawing on 'evidence by Israeli intelligence', Trump echoed his NSS: the 'Iranian promise [to halt the nuclear programme] was a lie . . . [if the US] allowed this deal to stand, there would soon be a nuclear arms race in the Middle East'.<sup>42</sup> Trump then combined the danger of Iran's possession of dangerous weapons with its support for terrorism: 'the world's leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons'.<sup>43</sup> Finally Trump cited the direct threat this poses to the American homeland: 'We will not allow American cities to be threatened with destruction'.<sup>44</sup> A similar line of argument that combines Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons with its support for terrorism, thus heightening the threat to US security, was pursued by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a *Foreign Affairs* piece. Referring to Iran as a 'rogue state', Pompeo argued that the deal neither delayed Iran's nuclear programme nor prevented its 'malign influence and terror threat' from growing.<sup>45</sup> President Trump, thus Pompeo concluded, 'inherited a world in some ways as dangerous as the one faced by the United States on the eve of World War I, the one right before World War II, or that during the height of the Cold War'.<sup>46</sup> This strategy, which heightens the security threat through linking the possession of dangerous weapons by a rogue state to the threat of terrorism is reminiscent of Bush's speeches on Iraq. Upon Saddam's removal, Bush declared: 'We have removed an ally of al-Qaeda . . . No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because that regime is no more'.<sup>47</sup>

To Trump, Pompeo and critics of the Iran deal, Iran's attempt to possess nuclear weapons is inseparable from its spread of terror and influence in the region. As one critic put it, 'the deal has greatly strengthened Iran's hand in the Middle East. [That] Tehran is using the cash . . . to project its influence throughout the region'.<sup>48</sup> Such combination however exaggerates Iran's abilities, and, in the process, sacrifices an issue of vital interests to the US and its allies: the potential for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. Echoing Morgenthau's critique of US policymakers' exaggeration of the threat from Vietnam, Walt for example castigated the Trump administration for its exaggeration of the Iranian threat despite Iran's lack of hard and soft power to dominate the region.<sup>49</sup> Walt argued that this 'influence' that Iran may exert the region is not really a threat to US vital interests, since the combined force of Sunni-alliance and Israel contains it. Obama made a similar case earlier when he responded to critics of his deal, arguing that 'Iran's defence budget is eight times smaller than the combined budget of our Gulf allies. Their conventional capabilities will never compare with Israel's'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, while it is desirable from the US perspective to eliminate any attempts by Iran to support proxies and dominate the region, the fact that this threat is contained shows that it is more vital from the standpoint of the US interests to prioritise the issue of nuclear proliferation.

Once the Iranian threat is exaggerated, however, desirable interests become confused with vital interests, and US foreign policy becomes inflexible, an all or nothing, that requires military force to protect these interests.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in subsequent events the US engaged in actions such as the killing the Iranian General Soleimani, which in turn led to an escalation with Iranian proxies killing two US soldiers and the US retaliating with airstrikes.<sup>52</sup> In light of these events, it is crucial to ask: is it rational to risk war when US interests can be served by other means? Given that the risk of war may damage wider US interests, through further destabilisation in the Middle East, the stakes are high not to



engage in this course of action. Just as Ahsan L. Butt argued in the case of Bush in Iraq,<sup>53</sup> however, Trump's aim vis-a-vis Iran is not concrete interests that he seeks to serve, but the demonstration of power as an end in itself, a phenomenon Morgenthau also observed early on in Vietnam and associated with irrationality. This demonstration can be seen most clearly in Trump's tweets such as,

'The United States just spent Two Trillion Dollars on Military Equipment. We are the biggest and by far the BEST in the World! If Iran attacks an American Base, or any American, we will be sending some of that brand new beautiful equipment their way. . .and without hesitation!'.<sup>54</sup>

'To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE'.<sup>55</sup>

Such threats on Twitter led psychiatrists to question the President's mental health, highlighting tendencies that Morgenthau's associated with irrationality in foreign policy: the demonstration of power as a means to 'pump [the President's] ego and to assuage his inherent low self-esteem'.<sup>56</sup> The President was not alone in raising such threats. Pompeo's *Foreign Affairs* piece for example concludes with statements such as 'the Iranian regime understands and fears the United States' military might' and 'the Islamic Republic cannot match the United States' military prowess, and we are not afraid to let Iran's leaders know it'.<sup>57</sup> The result is akin to Iraq and Vietnam: the primacy of empirical power that serves US policymaker's egos and gives them the illusion of mastery of reality while dragging the US into an open ended conflict. This illusion escalated the war in Vietnam, forcing the Viet Cong 'into an unwanted dependence on China'.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, by ending the nuclear deal today it increased Iran's dependence on Russia and China.<sup>59</sup> And just as military escalation proportionately increased Vietnamese nationalism and 'anti-colonial' legitimization, excessive demonstration of empirical power by the Trump administration further strengthens the legitimacy of the Iranian regime as it portrays itself an anti-colonial liberator in the region.<sup>60</sup> Suleimani's death rallied the Iranian people behind their leaders against US aggression.<sup>61</sup> The US fight to liberate Iranians from the tyranny of their rulers, paradoxically, turned the Iranians' fight against US tyranny. Trump's 'transactionalism' and 'America First' nationalism, therefore, cannot be deemed as 'fundamentally realist in nature' as Schweller argues.<sup>62</sup> For realism is not about looking at one's interests 'narrowly defined',<sup>63</sup> but, as Morgenthau notes in *Politics Among Nations*, about considering 'the national interests of the other side' and being 'willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital' to one's interests.<sup>64</sup> And this, precisely, is what Trump's nationalistic universalism, that is, depoliticisation of US interests beyond diplomatic compromise with Iran, long deemed as the 'great satan',<sup>65</sup> cannot achieve.

In sum, despite 'Trump's rejection of his predecessor's notion of an arc of history moving towards universal liberalism',<sup>66</sup> like his predecessors Trump substitutes normative power for empirical power. Consequently, although liberalism has been abandoned, US foreign policy remains irrational in its pursuit of nationalistic universalism. Trump thus reveals a puzzle: that US foreign policy can be *both* irrational *and* illiberal simultaneously. How can this puzzle be explained?

## Rationality and liberal modernity in Morgenthau: an on-going tension

This section argues that Morgenthau's work explains the Trump puzzle: irrationality in Morgenthau is not rooted in liberalism per se but the dynamics of liberal modernity, which lead to the displacement of normative power for empirical power in the pursuit of nationalistic universalism in US foreign policy. As rationality is unequipped to resolve the challenge of liberal modernity, this, on the one hand, reveals an on-going tension – between rationality and liberal modernity – within Morgenthau's theoretical analysis. On the other hand, this tension leaves Morgenthau's concept of interest 'defined as power' vulnerable to misappropriation to ends contrary to their original aim: furthering nationalistic universalism in the pursuit of empirical power.

The continuity rather than change in US foreign policy, despite the 'illiberal' president shows that liberal hegemony may be a false ideology in post-Cold War US foreign policy as neo-realists argued, but it is not the driver behind irrationality. The driver, rather, is the challenge of liberal modernity, from which Trump's nationalistic universalism stems. As Williams notes in his analysis of Morgenthau, 'nationalistic universalism in general, and fascism in particular were products of liberal modernity'.<sup>67</sup> In *Politics Among Nations* Morgenthau depicted the link between liberal modernity and nationalistic universalism. According to Morgenthau, liberal modernity on the one hand led to 'the emancipation of the individual from the ties of tradition, especially in the form of religion, of the increased rationalisation of life and work, and of cycle economic crises'.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, 'the insecurity of the groups affected by these factors found an emotional outlet in fixed and emotionally accentuated nationalistic identification'.<sup>69</sup> After applying this analysis to the cases of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, Morgenthau, in the late 1970s, turned the critique towards the US. In a prophetic passage, Morgenthau predicted that 'the United States is likely to partake to a growing extent in those tendencies in modern culture which have found their most extreme manifestations in Soviet Russia and National Socialist Germany'.<sup>70</sup> It is no coincidence that Morgenthau argued this in the late 1970s, for it was the context of the early rise of neo-liberalism, the end of Bretton Woods and Vietnam. The link between the rise of neo-liberalism and the atomisation of society on one hand, and then the rise of nationalism is well documented. David Harvey,<sup>71</sup> for example, drew this link in the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism and neo-conservatism in the post-Cold War era.

Studies have shown that the atomisation of society, lack of tradition and socio-economic uncertainties in liberal modernity lead to increasing levels of ontological insecurity: the 'confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity'.<sup>72</sup> Under these conditions, where the threat to continuity is both ideational (due to the lack of tradition) and material (due to economic crises), the individual's sense of insecurity and powerlessness reaches new heights. Since the desire for security and power cannot be fulfilled domestically, they are projected on the international scene. Here the powerless and insecure individual in liberal modernity identifies their power and security with their foreign policy leaders' invocation of the nation's power. Thus, Trump's irrationality in foreign policy, his demonstration of US power as an end in itself, does not

only serve his own individual ego and self-esteem,<sup>73</sup> but also, by stabilising US identity and creating its sense of superiority over other nations, offers (a false sense of) ‘ontological security’ to his followers.<sup>74</sup> In a reality of insecurity and powerlessness, nationalistic universalism offers a false sense of superiority of the nation’s ideological pursuit of seemingly ‘universal’ values, with consequences for irrational, hubristic, pursuits in foreign policy.

More recent studies have thus linked the analysis of ontological security to the rise of populism in world politics – for example, in Turkey,<sup>75</sup> India,<sup>76</sup> and Trump in the US.<sup>77</sup> In this context, Trump provides a security net, the (illusion of) continuity,<sup>78</sup> in a atomised, unequal society that lost meaning to hedonistic materialism. Morgenthau’s analysis of liberal modernity warned against this, particularly in *The Purpose of American Politics*, where he highlighted the dangers of the decline of transcendental standards in American politics beyond a status quo that defines progress in terms of the narrow materialist improvement of hedonistic lifestyles.<sup>79</sup> The result, Morgenthau observed, was that power became unrestrained by truth,<sup>80</sup> leading to US foreign policy pursuing an irrational, hubristic, course. This observation materialised with Trump: following the economic crisis in 2008 and the crisis of democratic legitimacy due to excessive interventionism, US foreign policy did not simply retreat to its pre-WWII isolationism. Rather, it led to the intensification of nationalism in US foreign policy in the form of ‘America First’. ‘America First’ in this case, became part of what Maximilian Mayer terms as ‘historical statecraft’: a practice that restores ontological security through a selective and systematic reading of history that ideologically legitimises US foreign policy and stabilises US identity under the banner of nationalistic universalism.<sup>81</sup>

This reveals, first, a fundamental tension between rationality and liberal modernity, which in turn impacts US foreign policy. Second, this tension undermines Morgenthau’s call for rationality in foreign policy. For, as Williams argues, Morgenthau’s ‘rejection of its affective power leaves him with the fundamental problem of sustaining or reviving a virtuous and self-limiting political order when the increasingly bureaucratised and anomic conditions that he sees characterising modern politics militate against such developments’.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Morgenthau’s rationality offers an insufficient tool to take upon the challenge of liberal modernity, for rationality in foreign policy is juxtaposed with dynamics that lead to irrationality, which are rooted in psycho-political, social and economic causes. To be sure, Morgenthau was aware of this tension. For example, in *Politics in the Twentieth Century* Morgenthau wrote,

‘The difficulties which stand in the way of the theoretical understanding of international politics have grown more formidable with the ever more intensive identification of national purposes and policies with absolute truth and universal morality . . . To look in such circumstances at one’s own nation and its relations with other nations objectively, dispassionately, critically has never been more difficult, hazardous, and necessary than it is today. This presents a theory of international politics with its supreme intellectual and moral challenge’.<sup>83</sup>

Morgenthau was thus aware of the danger of democratic politics descending into demagoguery and the pursuit of irrational foreign policy in liberal modernity. His republican vision sought to counter this.<sup>84</sup> According to Morgenthau, deliberation, contestation and critique were essential requisite of restraint in foreign policy. They stood in the face of a

key method in an irrational foreign policy – the inflation of threats to justify policy. As Tjalve and Williams put it, democratic deliberation sought to avoid foreign policy becoming ‘the unquestioned (and unquestioning) domain of unanimity in the face of danger’.<sup>85</sup> Little can be found, however, in Morgenthau’s work on the social and economic remedies of rising inequalities, economic crises and loss of meaning in liberal modernity. On issues such as economic redistribution and social justice as Scheuerman argued,<sup>86</sup> Morgenthau, compared to other classical realists such as Carr, was largely silent. This is, despite Morgenthau’s full awareness of the socio-economic power of corporations limiting individual freedom and power in modern democratic society,<sup>87</sup> as well as his concerns on the lack of higher purpose or meaning in American politics.<sup>88</sup>

Scheuerman once lauded Morgenthau’s attempt to bridge ‘cosmopolitan and realist ideas about IR’ while ascribing his failure to do so to ‘his unwieldy Schmittian intellectual baggage’.<sup>89</sup> Equally, Klusmeyer commended Morgenthau ‘for his ability to bridge the reason-of-state and republican traditions’, meanwhile he added that ‘Morgenthau’s blend of realism and republicanism [was incomplete because it] remained tied to the reductive assumptions about human nature’.<sup>90</sup> One might argue here, following a similar logic, that rationality in Morgenthau was problematic, not because it romanticised the ‘golden age of [nineteenth century] diplomacy’ *per se*,<sup>91</sup> but because its ethical underpinning, the lesser evil, was transposed from an ancient age that was foreign to liberal modernity. The ethics of the lesser evil that underpins Morgenthau’s concept of rationality is rooted in ancient Greek thought,<sup>92</sup> whereas the analysis of liberal modernity is, by definition, modern. There is a limitation in transposing ethical concepts rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, such as the lesser evil, in the twentieth century. For the challenge of liberal modernity did not exist in the former, but exists in the latter, making an application of this ethical concept from one into the other problematic. The tension between rationality and liberal modernity thus remains on-going.

This constant tension explains the misunderstanding and inapplicability of Morgenthau’s rationality in the modern context, for example during the Cold War,<sup>93</sup> which eventually came at great personal cost to Morgenthau, and which rendered classical (and neo) realism, to this day, uninfluential in US foreign policy. This was seen, for example, with the rise of neo-conservatives and the defeat of the neo-realists in post-Cold War US foreign policy.<sup>94</sup> The truth of the matter is, that having acknowledged the crisis of liberal modernity rooted in psycho-political and socio-economic realities, Morgenthau’s ethico-analytical tools, namely, prudence and restraint, faced these challenges unarmed. Consequently, irrationality looms in US foreign policy and Morgenthau’s concept of ‘interest defined as power’ is either rendered irrelevant or, worse, appropriated for ideological purposes against which Morgenthau militated in the first place: nationalistic universalism and the ideological pursuit of empirical power.<sup>95</sup> Harmut Behr wonders why Morgenthau failed to distinguish between empirical and normative power in his English writings, concluding that Morgenthau’s reception and influences ‘might have been quite different had he contrasted these two types of power’.<sup>96</sup> But even as this distinction is clear today, Morgenthau still faces the challenge of liberal modernity, which, as Morgenthau failed to adequately address it, constantly lapses normative power into empirical power in the pursuit of nationalistic universalism. Thus, while Morgenthau saw the contradiction in the liberal elevation of nationalism into a universal moral

principle that in turn became a deceptive political weapon to serve particular interests,<sup>97</sup> he did not anticipate this same contradiction to also engulf his own work – that is to say, power, on this occasion, which became a deceptive political weapon, not only universalised, but also used against Morgenthau himself.

## Conclusion

In a recent contribution on classical realism, Brian Rathbun argued that rationality in classical realism sets a high bar that few leaders meet due to cognitive shortcomings. ‘Rational thought is rare’ Rathbun wrote, ‘as we rely primarily on cognitive systems that are unconscious, intuitive, and emotional’.<sup>98</sup> This article instead argued that rationality’s shortcoming lies in its tension with liberal modernity. This argument speaks to two debates. First, speaking to neo-realist debates on post-Cold War US foreign policy, it argues that neither liberal ideology is the problem as neo-realists such as Mearsheimer and Walt argue, and nor is ‘restraint’ a sufficient answer to US foreign policy.<sup>99</sup> For neither of these go beyond the elite foci and/or relations between *great powers* to account for the dynamics that underlie and intensify irrationality in US foreign policy. The tension between rationality and liberal modernity highlighted in this article means that there is a problem with a policy advice of ‘restraint’ that focuses solely on the policy advice rather than the underlying dynamics that run the current against such a policy.

The second debate this article speaks to is academic IR, particularly those who work on the theoretical tradition of classical realism and its application to US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.<sup>100</sup> It is noteworthy here that there is a limitation that this literature needs to address. This limitation does not lie in taking Morgenthau’s concept of (ir) rationality and applying it to critique post-Cold War US foreign policy, which these works successfully accomplished. Recent scholarship on Morgenthau also did well to clarify the misunderstandings and ideological misappropriations of Morgenthau’s normative concept of power.<sup>101</sup> As this article argued, however, the challenge of liberal modernity and its tension with rationality means that Morgenthau’s normative concept of power is at constant risk to lapse into empirical power. In other words, it was no mere accident, nor simply due to the Cold War, that Morgenthau was ideologically misappropriated. Rather, Morgenthau’s work entails a tension that allows Morgenthau to be turned against himself. Academic literature on classical realism and its application to US foreign policy thus needs to pay more attention to this tension and its implications for US foreign policy diverting from its rational course and undermining US concrete interests and moral image.

Both debates, in this case, whether their focus is policy or IR scholarship, need to look beyond the international and domestic sources of US foreign policy. Instead, they need to heed the challenge of liberal modernity, and its implications for US foreign policy – a challenge that Morgenthau, both as policy advisor and IR theorist, was aware of, and yet failed to resolve, only to dissent against its implications in Vietnam. To heed the challenge of liberal modernity according to Morgenthau means to restore the sense of ‘national purpose’, equality in freedom, threatened by ‘concentrations of private power’.<sup>102</sup> Morgenthau referred to the latter as the ‘new feudalism’ that threatened US democracy internally through social injustice and inequalities and led to military adventures, such as



in Vietnam.<sup>103</sup> This ‘new feudalism’ in the post-Cold War era represents the foreign policy ‘establishment’ that took the US into foreign military adventures that Trump the candidate castigated. In serving private, often personal, interests, however, neither Trump’s domestic policies tackle issues of social injustice and economic inequality,<sup>104</sup> nor his foreign policy diverts from the irrational course. How, then, can US society heed the challenge of liberal modernity? In his epilogue in *Truth and Power* Morgenthau spoke about youth movements disillusioned by the status quo: social and racial injustices in US society and the war in Vietnam.<sup>105</sup> To Morgenthau, these youths were incapable of changing the status quo, since their techniques, whether the destruction of the university or the creation of sub-cultures, were ‘irrelevant to the distribution of power in society’.<sup>106</sup> Unlike in the 1960s, the youth today or the ‘millennial socialists’ as the *Economist* calls them,<sup>107</sup> are directly engaged in social movements,<sup>108</sup> as well as in government,<sup>109</sup> raising issues of social, economic, racial, as well as climate injustice. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate their potential to challenge the status quo. Importantly, however, in engaging more directly with the powers-that-be, they present an alternative to the dominance of the neo-liberal hegemony and Trump’s ‘neo-liberal nationalism’,<sup>110</sup> that may also provide an alternative emotional outlet to the powerless and insecure individual in liberal modernity. Whether this alternative can in fact alter the status quo, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy, and thus address the material and psychological issues underlying the irrationality of US foreign policy, is for future research to investigate.

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## Notes

1. Among others, see Haro L. Karkour, ‘Unipolarity’s Unpeacefulness and US Foreign Policy: Consequences of a “Coherent System of Irrationality”’, *International Relations*, 32(1), 2018, pp. 60–79; Anthony F. Lang, ‘Morgenthau, Agency, and Aristotle’, in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 18–41; Richard N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Adam Quinn, ‘Does the Flaw Lie Within Us? Classical Realism and Unrealistic Policy’, *Global Society*, 28(2), 2014, pp. 241–65; Michael Williams, ‘Morgenthau Now: Neoconservatism, National Greatness, and Realism’, in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 216–40; Nathan A. Sears, ‘Trump Can Learn From Morgenthau’s 6 Principles of Political Realism’, *The National Interest*, 20 February 2017, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-can-learn-morgenthau-6-principles-political-realism-19481> (accessed 19 May 2020).
2. I thank Reviewer 1 for drawing my attention to this distinction.
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  6. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, p. 238; Stephen Walt, ‘US Grand Strategy After the Cold War: Can Realism Explain It? Should Realism Guide It?’, *International Relations*, 32(1), 2018, pp. 16–7.
  7. John Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order’, *International Security*, 43(4), 2019, pp. 29, 39, 40, 43; Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, p. 231.
  8. Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order* (London: Polity Press, 2020), pp. 5, 20.
  9. As Trump’s decision to jettison Obama’s Iran deal did not clash with the ‘foreign policy establishment’, many of whom were against the deal (see Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, pp. 229–30), this justifies the use of ‘Trump’ and ‘US foreign policy’ interchangeably in this article. Furthermore, it shows that ‘irrationality’ is not necessarily the result of some clash between the President and the establishment.
  10. David Fromkin, ‘Remembering Hans Morgenthau’, *World Policy Journal*, 10(3), 1993, pp. 81–8; Karkour, ‘Unipolarity’s Unpeacefulness and US Foreign Policy’.
  11. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), pp. 7–8.
  12. Hans Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (London: Pall Mall, 1969).
  13. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy*, p. 10.
  14. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy*, p. 10. There is of course an element of contingency here. In the ‘Fog of War’, for example, McNamara recalls the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War, arguing that the former did not end in a war because there was one person in the room with JFK and the other decision makers, who had knowledge about the Soviet Union and Khrushchev, whereas during the latter there was no one with in-depth knowledge about Vietnam. I thank Reviewer 2 for raising this point.
  15. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy*, p. 8.

16. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1946); see also Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil', *Ethics*, 56(1), 1945, p. 11.
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18. Schuett, 'Freudian Roots of Political Realism', p. 60.
19. Roesch, 'Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics', p. 4.
20. Schuett, 'Freudian Roots of Political Realism', p. 63.
21. Roesch, 'Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics', p. 6.
22. Harmut Behr, 'Security, Politics and Public Discourse: A Morgenthauian Approach' in Mark Bevir, Oliver Daddow and Ian Hall (eds), *Interpreting Global Security* (London: Routledge, 2013), Behr, 'Security, Politics and Public Discourse', p. 168.
23. Behr, 'Security, Politics and Public Discourse', p. 165.
24. Sean Molloy, 'Aristotle, Epicurus and Morgenthau and the Political Ethics of the Lesser Evil', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 5(1), 2009, p. 94.
25. Roesch, 'Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics'.
26. See Morgenthau's critique in *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*.
27. Roesch, 'Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics', p. 14. As Morgenthau distinguished between these two concepts of power in his non-English writings (but not in America), Reviewer 2 wonders if Morgenthau's "'blurring" of his concepts wasn't deliberate after all'. Given Morgenthau's earlier distinction, it is only logical to assume that the blurring was deliberate. The question then becomes 'why' did Morgenthau blur these concepts? The answer is beyond the scope of this article.
28. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, p. 241.
29. Lang, 'Morgenthau, Agency, and Aristotle'.
30. Williams, 'Morgenthau Now'.
31. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*; Quinn, 'Does the Flaw Lie Within Us?'
32. Adam Quinn, 'The Art of Declining Politely: Obama's Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power', *International Affairs*, 87(4), 2011, pp. 803–24; Michael Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
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34. Karkour, 'Unipolarity's Unpeacefulness and US Foreign Policy', p. 13.
35. On this point, see also Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
36. As cited above in Notes 6 to 9.
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39. Karkour, 'Unipolarity's Unpeacefulness'.
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55. Donald Trump, Tweet on 23 July 2018; emphasis in original, available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1021234525626609666> (accessed 10 March 2020).
56. See Brandy Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2017), p. 27.
57. Pompeo, 'Confronting Iran', pp. 66–8.
58. Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 403.
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101. Inter alia, see Behr and Heath, 'Misreading in IR Theory and Ideology Critique'; Roesch, 'Pouvoir, Puissance, and Politics'.
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108. Such as the climate movement.
109. For example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; also represented by Bernie Sanders.
110. Eric Helleiner, 'The Life and Times of Embedded Liberalism: Legacies and Innovations Since Bretton Woods', *Review of International Political Economy*, 26(6), 2019, pp. 1112–35.

## Author biography

Haro L. Karkour teaches at the University of Birmingham. His research draws on IR theory, particularly classical realism, and its application to debates on US foreign policy, global justice and pluralism in global and post-colonial IR. His works on classical realism previously appeared in *International Relations*, *Journal of International Political Theory* and *European Journal of International Relations*.